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First-Year Law Students Prepare to Practice

By Jamie Sokolik

Once upon a time, the majority of law school graduates entered the job market expecting to land a traditional position and build a satisfying career. All that changed when the economy plummeted, and with it, the legal job market. DePaul has found a creative solution to help position College of Law graduates for a better start to their careers.

"There are only about half as many jobs as there are law graduates every year," says Assistant Dean and Director of Law Career Services Bill Chamberlain. "We looked at the situation and thought, 'How can we ensure DePaul students are in the half that gets the jobs?' We think Preparing to Practice is the answer."

Preparing to Practice, a required class as of fall 2014 for all first-year law students (1Ls), provides training in professional, strategic and interpersonal skills that are critical for job hunters. From a proper handshake to a well-constructed resume to the difference between the kind of email you send to a friend and the kind you send to your boss, the class covers many of the skills needed to find, get and keep a job. Many things offered in the class have been readily available to law school students who took the time to visit the career services office or attend programs. But, if there's one thing law students have in short supply, it's time. Making the two-semester class a required part of the 1L curriculum ensures students are ready to apply for internships and summer jobs after their first year of law school.

"I think it can be very daunting for students to start law school, and so they decide to just focus on their studies instead of learning job

skills, which they think they don't need right away," says Assistant Director of Law Career Services Bonnie Tunick. "In today's job market, you really can't do that. You have to do both from the beginning if you're going to build the network and perfect the skills you need to find a job when the time comes."

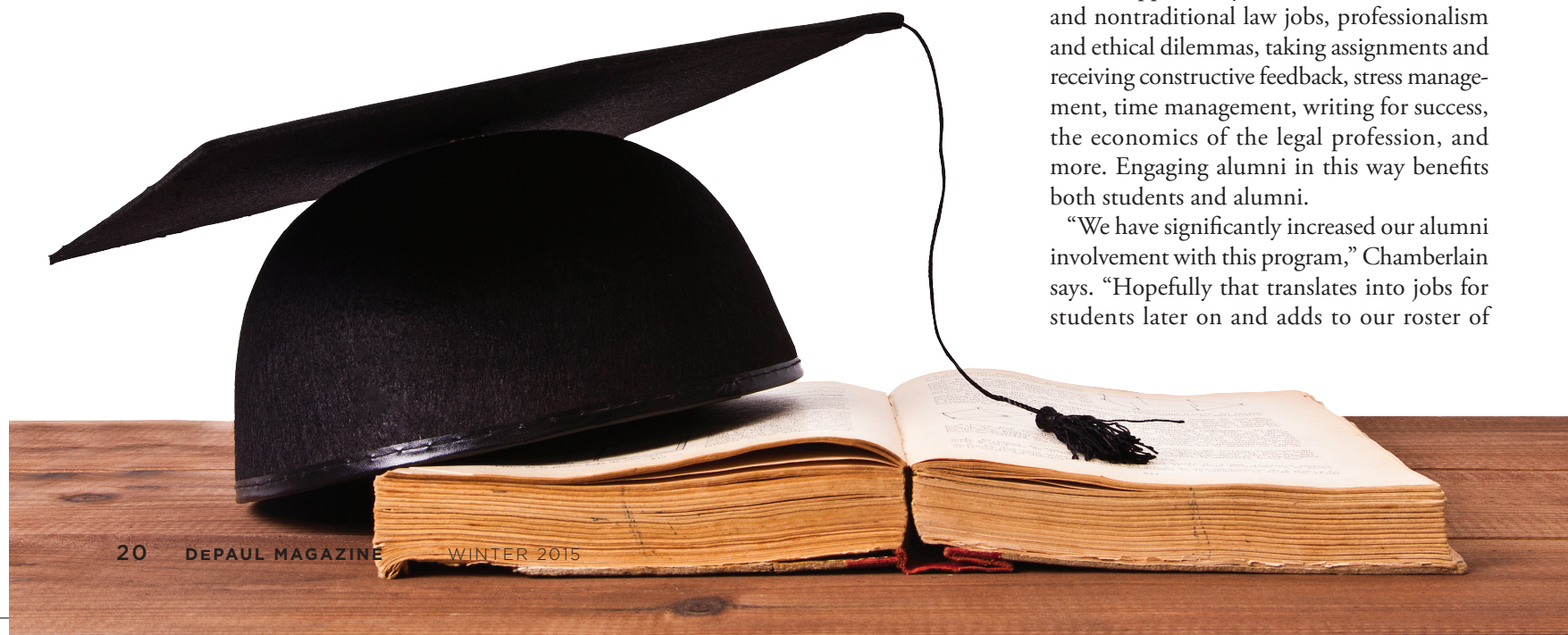
DePaul is one of very few law schools in the country—and the only one in Chicago—to create a curriculum around these skills and, with faculty support, make the class mandatory. Among the assignments every student is required to complete are drafting an approved legal resume, meeting with his or her career advisor, participating in a mock interview and attending several networking events.

"With students honing their skills from the beginning, their resumes will look better, their cover letters will read better and they will have better interview skills," Tunick says. "We hope that will further enhance the image of the school with employers, and they'll look at DePaul students and think, 'Wow, they're doing a great job. We want to hire more of them.'"

Alumni involvement

In the course, students complete mock interviews; make court visits; draft resumes and cover letters; learn about conducting a job search, interviewing and establishing a professional identity; attend panels staffed by College of Law alumni to hear firsthand experiences of determining a field of focus—the list goes on, and that's just the first semester. In the second semester, there will be more alumni panels and interactive sessions to give 1Ls the opportunity to learn about traditional and nontraditional law jobs, professionalism and ethical dilemmas, taking assignments and receiving constructive feedback, stress management, time management, writing for success, the economics of the legal profession, and more. Engaging alumni in this way benefits both students and alumni.

"We have significantly increased our alumni involvement with this program," Chamberlain says. "Hopefully that translates into jobs for students later on and adds to our roster of



engaged alumni. We want this class to come full circle and benefit the school as a whole.”

Regina Gaebel (JD ’04), surety claims counsel for Liberty Mutual Surety, served on a fall 2014 alumni panel that discussed litigation. She says the experience was positive for students and the alumni panelists.

“The students were interested and engaged,” Gaebel says. “It was apparent for the panelists that we were giving back in a very valuable way. To have this firsthand knowledge and background information from the start is ideal because the students will have that in the back of their minds as they’re making decisions about what classes to take and careers to explore. I would highly encourage other alumni to volunteer. It only takes about an hour to make a huge difference, and it’s a great experience.”

Student experience

Second- and third-year students have told Chamberlain and Tunick that they feel a Preparing to Practice course could have been helpful for them as 1Ls. First-year student Faizan Khan (LAS ’14), who is currently enrolled in the course, understands this sentiment. “At first, when I saw the syllabus, it felt kind of overwhelming,” he says. “But the class has made me more aware of my options after law school and has opened up a ton of networking opportunities.”

Khan also feels that he is more informed about the legal job market and the common pitfalls that new lawyers can experience. The

class has prepared him and his peers to navigate around some of the mistakes law graduates are prone to make.

“Given the current legal market, it’s incumbent upon students to be proactive,” he says. “Preparing to Practice establishes a general guideline to networking, job searching and professionalism that we might not otherwise have. It provides us with resources we can use so that we can be as effective and successful as possible in our job search and our professional lives in general.”

Student feedback has been resoundingly positive, with most students saying that they learned important skills from the class. “If you can walk away with new skills or new information, then it’s a huge benefit,” Tunick says. “You can get the greatest education in the world, but if you don’t know how to use that knowledge, what good is it? Balancing classroom lessons with real, hands-on skills, that’s how you get the job. We’re making that happen with Preparing to Practice.”

The experiences gained and connections made in this first semester are indicators of good things to come. “There’s a tremendous amount of DePaul pride out there, and we tap into that in Preparing to Practice and use it to help our students,” Chamberlain says. “DePaul people like to help DePaul people,” Tunick adds. “I think that makes all the difference.”

Alumni interested in volunteering for Preparing to Practice may fill out the volunteer form at bit.ly/P2Plaw.

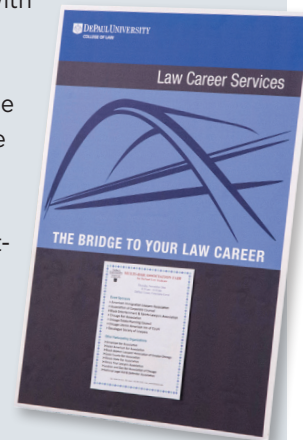
Third Year in Practice Program to Debut in 2016

Continuing DePaul’s dedication to adapting to the changing law environment and providing students with the best foundation possible, the College of Law will roll out the Third Year in Practice program (3YP) in fall 2016. Students who apply and are accepted will spend their entire third year participating in professional skills courses, clinics and intensive externships, along with the 3YP seminar, which will emphasize self-directed learning skills. The program was conceived to educate students on engaging in reliable legal reasoning and applying it in the real world. In addition, the program will help meet the needs of law firms that need new associates who have extensive practical training and can begin producing immediately.

“The law job market is changing, and so are the needs of the law firms employing recent graduates,” says Director of 3YP and the Poverty Law Clinic David Rodriguez. “Graduates need to enter the field with substantial hands-on experience, and not many law schools are providing enough of that. This is DePaul’s way of ensuring that our students hit the ground running and avoid the baptism by fire that I went through when I started my first law job with almost no practical training in law school.”

The first 3YP class will apply in October 2015 for admission in fall 2016. In the first two years, the 3YP class will be kept to approximately 20–24 people.

“We want our students to think like lawyers and think of themselves as lawyers before they graduate,” Rodriguez says. “If we can cultivate that mindset not only in our 3YP class, but also our entire graduating class, we will have gone a long way toward accomplishing our mission as a law school.”



First-year law students discuss the basics of networking and other job-seeking skills as part of Preparing to Practice.